



Oral To Print – A Study Of The Evolution And Emergence Of Arabi-Malayalam

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Abstract: This paper discusses the development of a peculiar script born from the confluence of Arabic and Malayalam languages in Malabar, Kerala. The study follows the historic traces of Arabi-Malayalam and traces its nativity to the early Arab traders' interactions with the local people speaking in Malayalam. The paper establishes this through an analysis of historical documents, manuscripts, and oral traditions that establish the emergence of this script system through adapting Arabic script to represent Malayalam phonetics. It looks at how oral tradition was put into the written text, challenges in the process of standardisation of the script, and whether techniques of performance of oral tradition were adequately adapted to the written medium. It also argues about how technological, logistic, and socio-political factors-configurations of colonialism and resistance-applied their influence upon both the development and dissemination of Arabi-Malayalam literature.

The interviews reveal that Arabi-Malayalam has been and continues to be a steadfast contributor in this field, making serious contributions toward literacy and regional linguistic diversity. The paper reflects upon the renewed interest in Arabi-Malayalam in modern times as an essential component in the preservation of Kerala's cultural heritage against globalising pressures. The study is an exhaustive analysis of how Arabi-Malayalam has stood resilient and adaptable for generations, serving as a symbol of cultural synthesis and linguistic diversity within Malabar society.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Arabi-Malayalam script system was developed from the crossroads of Arabic and Malayalam and embodies a unique historical-cultural synthesis in Malabar, Kerala. This is a linguistic phenomenon that emerged from extensive interactions between the Arab traders and the local populace speaking Malayalam. As a matter of fact, it is a rich tapestry of socio-cultural and economic exchanges that have crucially shaped the identity of the region. Its roots go further back to the early centuries of the second millennium when active spice trading was carried on by Arab traders with the Malabar Coast, and their relations with it were very strong. Along with goods, the traders brought with them their language, Arabic, and their culture of Islam, which in due course of time blended with the local Malayalam culture and gave birth to Arabi-Malayalam.

It is the Mappila community that stands at the center of this historical narration, playing a bridge role between the Arab traders and the indigenes through whom these cultural and linguistic exchanges gave birth to this script. The merger of Arabic with Malayalam was not just transliteration but had grown into a system with provisions for phonetic and syntactic requirements of both languages. Early literature of this nature, like *Muhy Al-Dīn Māla*, was rendered in Arabic script to represent Malayalam phonetics-the first efforts at a unique script system.

Ranging from oral traditions to written texts, the journey of Arabi-Malayalam was beset with obstacles in the course of standardisation of the script and preparing oral compositions for print. Printing presses established in the late nineteenth century played a major role in this transition, despite initial technological and logistical hurdles. The development was further complicated since during the colonial period, British authorities often viewed Arabi-Malayalam literature with suspicion due to its association with anti-colonial sentiments.

Yet amidst this, there was resilience that ensured the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Mappila continued to survive and flourish. The religious texts, poems, and educational materials of the Arabi-Malayalam literature have contributed much toward intellectual and cultural dynamism in the region. Indeed, its continuing legacy is represented by the popular appeal of Mappilapattu, or Mappila songs, and the use of this script in religious and educational contexts.

Of late, with the advent of modern times, interest in Arabi-Malayalam is again motivated through various seminars, workshops, and campaigns related to the preservation and promotion of this unique aspect of Kerala's cultural heritage. In this respect, revival efforts underline the historical importance of the script and its function of maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity amidst globalisation.

The present study proposes to locate the historical genesis of Arabi-Malayalam, examine the problems and processes involved in its journey from oral tradition to written text, and highlight its resilience. In the process, an attempt is made to situate the script in the cultural confluence and linguistic pluralism of Malabar and to underscore its preservation and propagation in the modern context.

I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research study will explore the prospects for evolution and contemporary relevance of Arabi-Malayalam in detail, drawing on an oral tradition that eventually passed through the written text phase within its own cultural context. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for capturing nuances, complexities, and subjective experiences that are intrinsic in language evolution and cultural dynamics.

Historical Analysis: Carry out critical studies of available historical and other documents, manuscripts, and archival materials, and literature in Arabi-Malayalam. Situate, on the basis of linguistic contact, cultural exchange, and religious influences, the historical context in which Arabi-Malayalam took birth. Trace the evolution of Arabi-Malayalam from its very beginning to modern times, and present the important milestones, personalities, and events that have characterised its development.

II. TRACING THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF ARABI-MALAYALAM

The script system developed out of the confluence of the Arabic and Malayalam languages-Arabi-Malayalam-developed profound historical roots linked with the socio-cultural-economic history of the Malabar region of Kerala. This peculiar linguistic phenomenon emerged with the large-scale interactions of Arab traders with the local Malayalam-speaking populace, eventually leading to a rich cultural synthesis that has left an indelible mark upon history and regional identity.

The very historical roots of Arabi-Malayalam date back to the early centuries of the second millennium when Arab traders began establishing strong trade relations with the Malabar Coast. Most of the traders were into the spice trade, and therefore, they carried not only goods in their baggage but also the Arabic language and the culture of Islam. The presence of Arabs in Malabar dates back to the early mediaeval period, with settlements and mosques in the area predating the arrival of Europeans. The need for a script that would cater to the phonetic peculiarities of Arabic and Malayalam thus led to the integration of Arabic into Malayalam and gave rise to Arabi-Malayalam.

The term 'Mappila' existed even before the emergence of Muslims in Kerala and referred to the Muslim community in Kerala. The title 'Mappila', according to Kutty (2007), was a term of respect applied to several communities and included Nasrani Mappilas, the Christians and Jonaka Mappilas, who were the Muslims. This in itself points to the fact that the title and the community it addressed were already in the cultural lexicon of Kerala before Islam had fully taken root there. The Mappila community thus became a bridge between the

Arab traders and the local population, and this helped the facilitation of cultural and linguistic exchanges which later were to constitute the creation of Arabi-Malayalam.

This was done gradually, more or less as an effect of socio-religious and economic interactions between the two. Later on, with Arabic getting the status of a language for religious instruction and trade, the people in the locale began assimilating Arabic vocabulary and script into Malayalam. This integration gave birth to a unique script system: Arabic characters were used to represent Malayalam phonology, thus mixing the two linguistic traditions. Rather, the adaptation was not a transliteration per se but an evolved system to provide for the phonetic and syntactic requirements of both languages. Indeed, this sort of linguistic convergence is epitomised by Muhy Al-Dīn Māla, the first extant Arabi-Malayalam literary work. Works like these employed the Arabic script to carry Malayalam phonetics, which marked the beginning of Arabi-Malayalam as a script system sui generis. Quite pragmatically, Arabic script was naturally the one that was widely in use among the Muslim population; it was symbolic of expressing both the Islamic identity of the Mappilas and their cultural and linguistic ties to the Malayalam-speaking population. Arabi-Malayalam had to take shape within the socio-cultural context of Malabar. This cosmopolitan nature, brewed by centuries of maritime trade, brewed a melting pot of cultures and languages. The local rulers and communities were usually very receptive to the foreign traders, including Arabs, whose influence percolated into the very way of life that touched upon issues of faith, commerce, and learning. Indeed, protection and patronage offered by local empires to the Arab traders made their cultural and linguistic impact persistent.

According to K.N. Panikkar, the Mappilas—who were either descendants of Arab traders or Hindu converts to Islam—played an important role in this cultural exchange. Particularly, the Mappilas functioned as mediators by assimilating and acculturating the Arabic way of living, religious ethos, and language into the local setting. This resulted in the absorption of Arabic script in Malayalam and gave birth to Arabi-Malayalam. Hence, the local rulers normally favoured the building of mosques and the establishment of educational institutions teaching both Arabic and Malayalam with a view to the consequent economic benefits flowing from the good relations with Arab traders.

Religious institutions also have a very important role to play in the development of Arabi-Malayalam. Mosques and madrasas were centers of learning where Arabi-Malayalam was used to a great extent for religious instruction. Quran, Hadith, and other Islamic texts were taught using this system, so the Muslims of the locality could easily learn religious knowledge in a language and script they understood. This educational framework helped standardise the script and furthered literacy among the Mappilas.

The influence of Arabic on Malayalam, especially for religious purposes, also influenced the local culture in its way. Religious songs and poems, otherwise called Mappilapattu, were composed in Arabi-Malayalam and ranged from pure Arabic religious themes to purely Malayalam poetic traditions. These compositions formed an integral part of the religious and cultural lives of the Mappilas and were performed during festivals, weddings, and other communal events.

The historical roots of Arabi-Malayalam are embedded in the active interaction between Arabic and Malayalam-speaking cultures along the Malabar coast of Kerala. This tangle of languages and their script system is part of the tapestry of the region's history, inlaid with examples of cultural synthesis. This evolution once more forms a part of the greater Malabar historical and socio-cultural surroundings, indicating how trade, religion, and the choice of a new language have taken part in shaping the cultural identity of the region. Even to this day, Arabi-Malayalam forms part of the symbolic regional memory of historical openness to cultural exchange and of the capability of the regional culture to integrate diverse influences within an integral, continuing tradition.

III. ANALYSING THE CHALLENGES AND DYNAMICS IN THE TRANSITIONS FROM ORAL TRADITION TO WRITTEN TEXT

This transition in Arabi-Malayalam from oral tradition to written text was quite debilitating and had seen various dynamics in relation to printed works. The shift was not merely in the linguistic but in the greater cultural, technological fields reflecting larger socio-political changes within Malabar.

In the absence of a written text or record, there emerged an oral tradition among the Mappila community. Traditional Muslim song or Mappilapattu was an important constituent of this oral tradition. Many have utilised it as a medium of instruction and learning for both religious and secular education. According to Kutty, Mappilapattu served to assist the community in teaching their beliefs and allowed them to maintain continuity with their culture. These songs, composed in Arabi-Malayalam, were passed down through generations, preserving the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Mappilas.

It was from this oral tradition that the early Arabi-Malayalam literary works evolved. The early poetic forms like *Malapattu* and *Qissapattu* were the compositions which were transmitted orally before they became writings. As the texts turned from oral to written, the process involved was not merely the writing down of these texts but editing of those for the new medium of print. This transition happened in a gradual process, with various challenges involved regarding the standardisation of the script and adapting techniques of oral performance to written form.

The transition to the written texts faced some major difficulties: technological and logistical issues related to early printing. The earliest known printed works in Arabi-Malayalam, first published during the 1670s and 1680s, appeared in Amsterdam. Large-scale printing of Arabi-Malayalam texts began only from the late nineteenth century, when there was a diffusion of printing presses throughout South India. Several factors served to delay the adoption of printing technology in Malabar: limited availability of printing presses, the overall expense entailed by printing and the skilled labour required for operating the press.

The establishment of printing presses in Malabar marked a decisive turn in the history of Arabi-Malayalam literature, such as the one by Adam Hajji at Kannur in 1869. The printing presses made several materials ranging from religious texts to newspapers and pamphlets easy to produce and helped make written knowledge more accessible to the community. Early printed texts suffered from faulty spelling and formatting, reflecting the lack of standardised conventions in Arabi-Malayalam. The publishers and writers had to overcome these difficulties to produce a legible, coherent text that could reach wider audiences.

This shift from orality to written texts mirrored larger socio-political dynamics in the region. The British colonial period was the most formative period in the production and circulation of the literature of Arabi-Malayalam. British officials tended to view Mappilapattu and other forms of literature in the Arabi-Malayalam genre with suspicion, regarding them as close to anti-colonial sentiments. In fact, during the Mappila Rebellion of 1921-a major armed rebellion against British colonial rule- Arabi-Malayalam literature was put into action to mobilise and communicate among members of the rebellion. In this way, Arabi-Malayalam became inescapably linked with resistance further problematizing the process of producing and publicising written texts.

The challenges facing the Arabi-Malayalam literary tradition were also compounded by attempts from the colonial regime to control and censor printed materials. Much writing that was perceived as subversive or nationalist was suppressed or destroyed. These varied challenges did nothing to thwart continued community production and circulation of literature in Arabi-Malayalam. The resiliency of the Mappila people in maintaining their literature throughout the colonial period speaks to the intrinsic values they placed on their cultural and linguistic traditions. The development of printed Arabi-Malayalam works contributed to a cultural and educational awakening among the Mappila people. This was due to the fact that the printed texts allowed standardisation of the script and gave religious, educational, and cultural knowledge to a larger audience. This facilitated greater literacy and education within the community and helped preserve and transmit its cultural heritage. The printed works were not limited to religious texts, but rather included educational materials, like textbooks, grammar, and histories that facilitated the intellectual growth of the community.

The translations of sacred religious texts such as the Quran into Arabi-Malayalam were another salient feature of this educational endeavour. Such translations made religious knowledge more accessible to the Mappilas, studying and understanding their religious texts in their own language. Establishment of madrasas and other places of learning that used Arabi-Malayalam as the medium of instruction further reinforced the importance of written texts in the community's cultural and educational life.

From oral tradition to written text, the transition of Arabi-Malayalam was fraught with challenges and dynamics. Technological adaptation, standardisation of script, and socio-political obstacles were some of the challenges to be mounted in the development of printed works. Despite such challenges, the Mappila community ultimately succeeded in preserving and furthering their linguistic and cultural heritage through written texts. In this way, the transition smoothed the path for greater literacy and education, and the continuity and growth of the Arabi-Malayalam literary tradition reflected the resilience and adaptability of the community vis-à-vis the emergence of new historical and cultural scenarios.

IV. SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE ENDURING LEGACY OF CULTURAL SYNTHESIS AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN THE MALABAR REGION

Thus, the eternal tradition of Arabi-Malayalam in Malabar stands as a friendly testimony to the rich history of cultural melting and linguistic diversity undertaken by the region. It is this peculiar script system, born out of the amalgamation of Arabic and Malayalam, that has left an indelible mark on the cultural and linguistic landscape of Kerala. Various aspects of its history, literature, and cultural identity bear enough witness in the eternal legacy of Arabi-Malayalam, within a dynamic interplay of different cultures and languages. Such a cultural synthesis would be an uncanny label for Malabar history. This interaction happened with the Arab traders and the local populace, resulting in the fusion of their cultures, customs, and languages. This synthesis finds expression in the region's architecture, cuisines, and social practices that bespeak both Arab and local imprints. This is particularly so for the Mappila community, whose special customs and traditions incorporate elements of both Arab and Kerala cultures. The Mappilas are inextricably connected with Arabi-Malayalam, which functions as a kind of symbol of their cultural identity. It is evident that the script system has not only facilitated religious and educational pursuits but has emerged as a marker of distinct identity to this community. Arabi-Malayalam was used for religious and literary works, thus preserving and propagating the cultural values and tradition the Mappilas upheld and nurtured, thereby reinforcing a sense of community and belonging. This cultural synthesis may be regarded as proof of historical openness in the region towards external influences and of its capacity to collate such varied cultural elements into a cohesive identity.

The contribution of Arabi-Malayalam literature is of significance, depicting a sufficiently wide genre of themes. From religious texts and study materials to poetry and historical accounts, the Arabi-Malayalam literature epitomises the intellectual and cultural dynamism of the Mappila people. This innovation in using the script for inscribing Malayalam phonetics through the Arabic character presents another instance of linguistic creativity and adaptiveness among the community.

The most striking contribution of Arabi-Malayalam literature has been in the genre of Mappilapattu, better known as Mappila songs. A unique manifestation of the Mappila cultural identity, these songs merge elements from Arabic and Malayalam alike with equal ease. Mappilapattu sings about religious devotion, love, heroism, and social commentary, among other themes. It is true that over time, the genre has kept pace with modern issues and styles while retaining its traditional moorings. The persisting popularity of Mappilapattu underlines the importance of the place of Arabic-Malayalam literature in the cultural history of this region and their enduring contribution to the cultural life here.

The impact of Arabi-Malayalam is great in education and religion in Malabar. The script system did pave the way for a wider diffusion of religious knowledge and educational materials, leading to a greater degree of literacy and intellectual development within the Mappila community. Madrasas and other places of learning using Arabi-Malayalam as the medium of instruction played an important role in the safekeeping and transmitting of religious and cultural knowledge.

The Quran and other religious texts, translated into Arabi-Malayalam, facilitated more religious knowledge among the local Muslims. This accessibility not only enhanced religious understanding but also reinforced the community's cultural and religious identity. The use of Arabi-Malayalam in religious education maintained the linguistic and cultural continuities of the Mappilas and allowed the religious and cultural practices to be preserved, dynamic, and functional in everyday life.

Of late, there has been an interest once again in the Arabi-Malayalam script and its rich heritage. The mobilisation for revival of the script and its promotion has picked up momentum once again, with several initiatives pointed at retaining this unique part of Kerala's cultural heritage. Both education programs, cultural festivals, and literary events have come to celebrate the Arabi-Malayalam tradition, attesting to both historical and contemporary relevance.

As a part of this general revival, Arabi-Malayalam also became the focus of attention to preserve and promote the linguistic and cultural pluralism of Kerala. Herein lies the recognition that something must be done to protect the rich cultural heritage in the face of globalisation and homogenization of cultures. The promotion of the study and use of Arabi-Malayalam is the effort for the preservation of linguistic diversity and cultural synthesis in Malabar.

The theorised survival of Arabi-Malayalam in Malabar speaks to the storied culture synthesised into a blend of languages. A script born out of the confluence of Arabic and Malayalam has left an indelible mark on the cultural and linguistic topography of Kerala. The bequeathed legacy of Arabic-Malayalam speaks volumes through literature, education, and a glimpse into the cultural identity that is the outcome of a dynamic interaction between cultures and languages. This rich legacy needs to be understood and preserved so that the future generation will also be able to preserve the rich cultural heritage of Malabar.

v. Conclusion

The deliberation on Arabi-Malayalam literature unravels before us a tapestry of works that reflect resilience, innovativeness, and cultural richness of Kerala's Muslim community. From as early as the seventeenth century, with seminal works such as *Muhy Al-Dīn Māla* by Qādī Muhammad al-Kālikūtī, Arabi-Malayalam literature has emerged as a rich and sprawling corpus of poems, prose texts, commentaries, adaptations, translations, and recensions. The publication of the Arabi-Malayalam works in Amsterdam during the 1670s and 1680s is a significant landmark, reflecting the spread and influence of the language beyond the borders of Kerala. The very large corpus and historical significance notwithstanding, Arabi-Malayalam literature has suffered marginality, which resulted in the loss of so many valuable compositions.

Needless to say, Arabic-Malayalam literature played a greatly important role in the communication, education, and cultural expression of Muslims in Kerala. Its themes ranged from the religious to the non-religious, political, and hagiographical, thus mapping the diversity of Malayali Muslim life. The genres comprised songs, prose, fiction, translations, and textbooks, underlining the versatility and adaptability of the language. In fact, Arabic-Malayalam literature also played an important role in social rituals and ceremonies and had been part of daily life.

Despite the loss of several works during the period of foreign invasion and British colonial 'censorship', because of the commitment of authors, publishers, and scholars, Arabi-Malayalam literature remained a success. Contributions from Moyinkutty Vaidyar and P.K Halima make this literature much more diverse and dynamic. Printing presses in Thalassery, Tirurangadi, and Ponnani hastened the publication of works in Arabi-Malayalam and further increased Kerala's literature.

In the present era, it is the recognition and preservation of Arabi-Malayalam literature that have assumed prime significance. The revival and propagation of the neglected works are essential to preserve the authentic traditional identity of Kerala while promoting linguistic diversity. Recognition of the historical value of Arabi-Malayalam literature can assist in achieving further historical conciliatory functions, which can also contribute to the enrichment of contemporary Malayalam literature.

Another critical role in the preservation of Arabi-Malayalam is that played by education. Through this network, such institutions as the Samastha Kerala Jem-iyathul Ulama oversee over 10,000 madrasas where Arabi-Malayalam holds a significant place in its curriculum. This ensures the continuance and propagation of the

language at the level of the younger generation, embedding it deeply within the educational framework of the community. Finally, the political importance of Arabi-Malayalam becomes most apparent in present-day usages: the language is employed by politicians such as M.B. Rajesh for wall writings for election campaigns. These usages prove the continuing relevance of the language and its ability to strike a chord with the people at the grassroots level and, therefore, reinforce its cultural and political relevance.

Arabi-Malayalam literature thus bears testimony to the resilience, imagination, and diverse culture of Kerala Muslims. Its preservation and propagation are not only imperative for paying due respect to the past but also for a valid shaping of Malayalam literature and identity in the future. Through concerted efforts and recognition, Arabi-Malayalam literature can reclaim its rightful place in Kerala's literary heritage, ensuring that its legacy endures for generations to come. By acknowledging and celebrating the contributions of this unique literary tradition, we can foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of Kerala's cultural diversity, enriching the broader tapestry of Indian literature.

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